

# VIEWPOINT

## OUR VIEW

### Supervisors quick to restore voting rights

**OUR POSITION:** *Despite questions, elections supervisors uphold, respect results of amendment vote.*

A tip of the hat to elections supervisors in Charlotte and Sarasota counties who immediately began registering felons granted the right to vote by 64 percent of the state's voters last November.

You might expect that to be a logical outcome, considering the adoption of the constitutional amendment. (See above approval vote: 64 percent.)

But it was not.

Notably, newly elected Gov. Rick DeSantis was among those who had argued the Legislature should act first on specific enabling legislation before new laws took effect.

He got that wrong. And, fortunately, elections supervisors have opened voter registration rolls to those who fall within the broad guidelines of Amendment 4.

The amendment (ibid., above 64 percent approval in the General Election) wiped away Florida's antiquated law that kept hundreds of thousands of ex-felons from voting. (Some estimates put the number of ex-felons at nearly 1.5 million citizens.) The laws were, essentially, a repressive vestige of Florida's Reconstruction Constitution, adopted and approved following the Civil War.

The law held that those convicted of felonies had to wait five years after satisfying the terms of release (following prison, probation and restitution) before they could apply for voting rights. After that long wait, individuals had to file an application for restoration to the four-person Clemency Board, made up of the governor, attorney general, chief financial officer and agriculture commissioner.

It was the board's choice to reinstate individual rights, or not. In fact, many ex-felons either gave up when faced with the curious process. Under some governors' direction, the process was simplified and accelerated (Gov. Bush and Crist), and under others slowed (Gov. Scott.)

In that way the process became political; to an extent. Which, since it involved voting rights, seemed improper. Not only in our view, but, eventually, to 64 percent of the voting public (ibid.)

Amendment 4 said felons would automatically have voting rights restored after all legal responsibilities were satisfied. That is, after their debt to society was repaid according to the law. It specifically exempted those convicted of murder or sex crimes. The only question following the election was, when?

For Charlotte County Elections Supervisor Paul Starnoulis and Sarasota County's Ron Turner, the answer was Jan. 8, the day the law took effect. Both offices took applications willingly, and without further action from the Legislature. Good for them.

There may well be gray areas that need to be addressed. Senate President Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, recently said some legal points may need to be clarified, but he also said the amendment was "self-implementing."

"There's a clear class of individuals who should be eligible to vote without further legislation."